

Lister restoration revealed

Teri Pecoskie

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Concealed by scaffolding and plywood for more than a year, the Lister Block has finally begun to shed its shroud.

The historic building, seen by many as a key to the rejuvenation of downtown Hamilton and one of its worst examples of urban decay, has undergone a tremendous transformation since crews began restoring the structure last September.

And while there's still a substantial amount of work to be done, the Lister's former beauty is already starting to show.

After stripping the building's interior back to its concrete skeleton, workers have now painstakingly restored or replaced much of the terracotta facade, oak storefronts, terrazzo floor tiles and skylights that characterize the King William Street landmark.

The project has been trying at times, said Shawn Marr, vice-president of developer Hi-Rise, but the results show the intricate restoration is well worth the trouble.

"Unlike new construction, which is very straightforward and relatively simple, when you have to integrate the heritage components of a building with the expectations of a modern structure, it's a heck of a challenge," he said.

"But the work has exceeded my expectations ... People who remember the Lister Block from three years ago as a derelict building are going to be completely overwhelmed."

According to Marr, whose company worked alongside the Laborers' International Union of North America on the \$25-million revamp, the project is also set to wrap up ahead of schedule — good news for the city, which will take ownership of the Lister once work on the 1924 classic renaissance building is complete.

The original plan saw the city taking up residence in March 2012, but Marr said he expects the building will be handed over a year earlier. He said the city will spend several months putting the finishing touches on the space, before about 300 city employees move into the upper floors in September 2011.

"When this deal was originally done, we gave ourselves an awfully long time, because nobody knew how long the heritage work and the heritage approvals were going to take," Marr said.



REVEALED. THE LISTER BLOCK'S RESTORED TERRA COTTA FEATURES ARE CLEARLY VISIBLE NOW THAT THE SCAFFOLDING HAS BEEN REMOVED FROM THE BUILDING'S UPPER FLOORS. TERI PECOSKIE/THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR SOURCE: THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

"The reason it was so important to have more time than needed was to protect the provincial grant. If we missed that date, we lost the grant."

He said the province set a deadline of March 2012 for the work to wrap up and the property to be transferred to city hands.

Downtown councillor and mayor-elect Bob Bratina maintains that even with the province's \$7-million contribution, the city still invested too much in the project.

"I'm glad the building is being restored, but the cost is way out of line," he said. "I never supported spending that much money on it."

Marr, however, said to demolish the building and construct a similar-sized structure from scratch would have actually put the city in a deeper hole, though he couldn't say specifically how much such a project would cost.

For Donovan Pauly, a building conservator for Clifford Restoration Ltd., it's not just the cost that's important, but also the opportunity to preserve a piece of the city's history.

"It shows what can be done for these old buildings," said Pauly, who's been on site nearly every day since the restoration began. "With a bit of goodwill and a lot of hard work, we can make these buildings survive.

"Building something new is all fine and good, but once it's gone, it's gone. For a city like Hamilton where so much has been lost already, I think it's important. It's going to be an anchor for this area of downtown."

Clifford vice-president Sam Trigila agrees.

"I think it looks fabulous," he said. "It's not going to look like a brand-new building. You'll kind of get the feel that it's been there for a long period of time.

"It's nice that it doesn't look crisp and new and flashy ... When a restoration is done properly it should look like you haven't done anything. It takes patience. You really want to do less."

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